

HOBO JUNGLE



You can thank my brother Pep for this. It was stored in my memory chip. But this is what happened. Back in the middle thirties, another thing that was fun. My brothers and Fats and Rick would go down to the freight yard near Eager Street and wait for the trains to come in. The hobos would ride in the empty box cars and jump off and stay together. Other guys would be leaving as the trains rolled off. Somebody would always have a big lard can boiling and each one would go and beg, borrow or steal food. As they came back they would put it in the can and let it boil. We didn't know they had a name for it. It was called 'Mulligan Stew'. It was our job as kids to go to the box cars and lift up the flaps and dig out this stuff with sticks. It looked like mop material and it was soaked in oil. It lubricated the wheel bearings on the freight cars. You don't hear it anymore but when the freight cars were going slow you could always hear one wheel squeeking. We didn't realize the harm we were doing. There were always ten to twenty men and us boys sitting around and listening to tales of the road. They probably lied a lot but we didn't know. The stuff we dug out of the train wheels would burn for hours and this is what they used to keep the camp and cook fire going. They would put chicken or hot dogs or fish; anything they could get in the can. It looked like dark oatmeal and they would dip it out and eat it - we never did. Getting back to the lard can, everybody cooked with lard then. Now they have all kinds of cooking oils and Crisco. The people bought it in quart cans but the restaurants got it in five gallon cans with lids. If you were lucky enough you could get one and use it to put garbage in. You could smell them coming a block away to collect the garbage on Mondays. Ashes went out on Wednesday and trash went out on Friday. I forgot one important thing, the stuff we dug out of the freight cars was called 'doggie'. Sometimes we would stay till midnight and when the hobos would lay down on their cardboard we would come home. 'Bedtime'. This was the great depression everywhere. The iceman would come with his horse and wagon or ~~truck~~ and everybody would have their card in the back window about twelve by twelve inches. Depending which way you put it you would get a five cent piece, or ten cent piece but on Friday you would get a quarter piece because he didn't come on Sunday. When he would take the ice in the house us kids would jump up in the wagon and get the chips and suck on them. Of course he always ran us off. Sitting here now I wonder what girls did then. Helen was only four so that let her out. Anyway this was part of life on Hennaman Avenue.

Jim, Sr.

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Hobo jungle
about 1938

